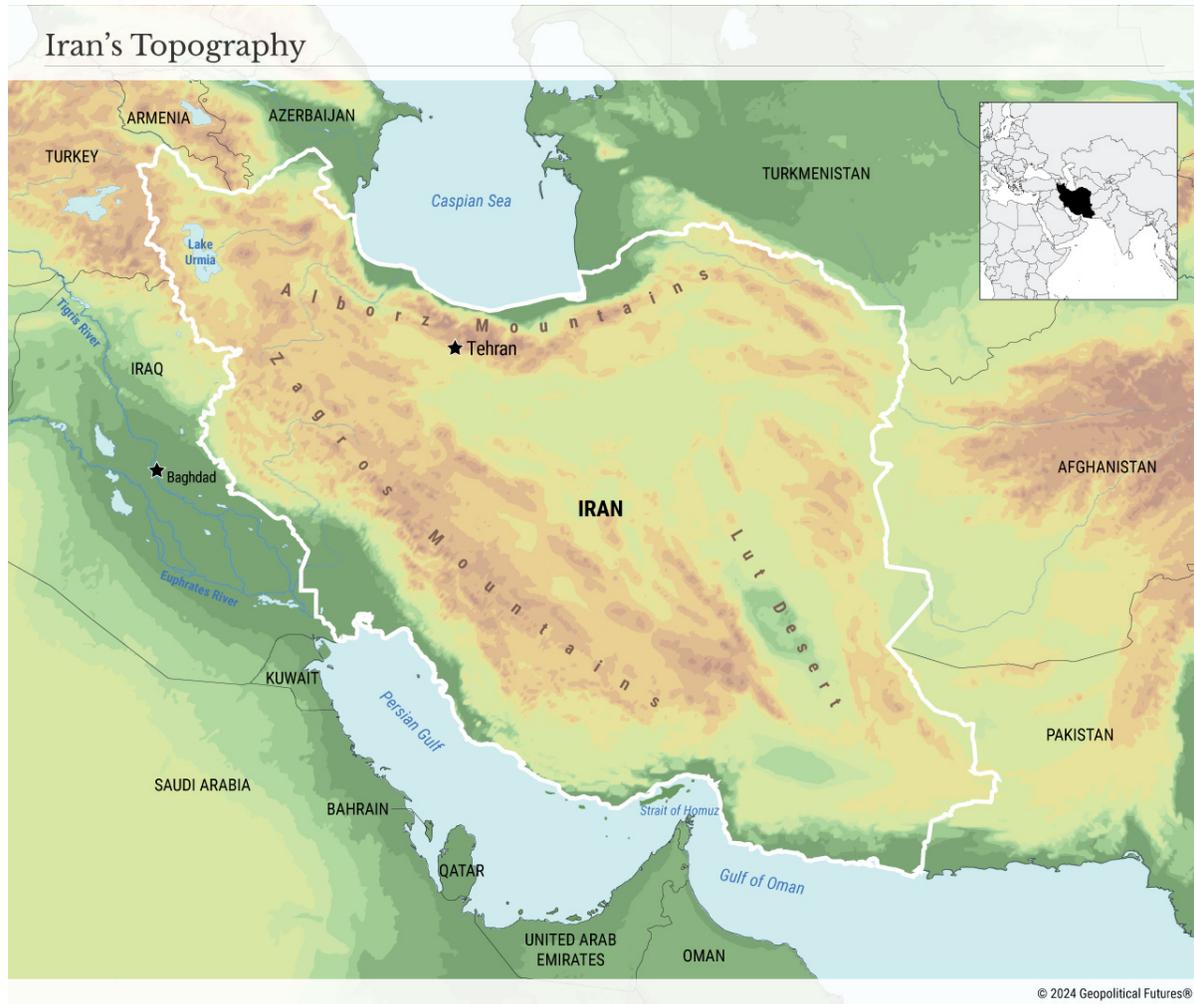


The Limits of Iran's Geopolitical Expansion

by Kamran Bokhari - January 4, 2024

After China and Russia, Iran is the biggest foreign policy challenge for the United States, one that has bedeviled successive administrations for nearly half a century. The Islamic Republic has long exploited chronic weaknesses in the Arab world, especially with regard to Israel, and built a broad sphere of influence in the Middle East. Though no single country in the region can counter Iran, Tehran is approaching the natural limits of its expansion. The most important of these are domestic political demands, which require the government's attention as it stands on the brink of evolutionary regime change.



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On Dec. 31, U.S. naval forces sunk three Houthi attack boats in the Red Sea. Until then, Iran’s regional proxies, including the Yemeni Houthis who had been attacking commercial vessels sailing through the region, had acted mostly with impunity. Groups in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq understood that other than the occasional Israeli or U.S. attack on their facilities, no one was going to check their advances. In fact, Saudi Arabia, the de facto leader of the Arab world, has urged Washington to exercise restraint against the Houthis for fear of a wider regional conflagration.

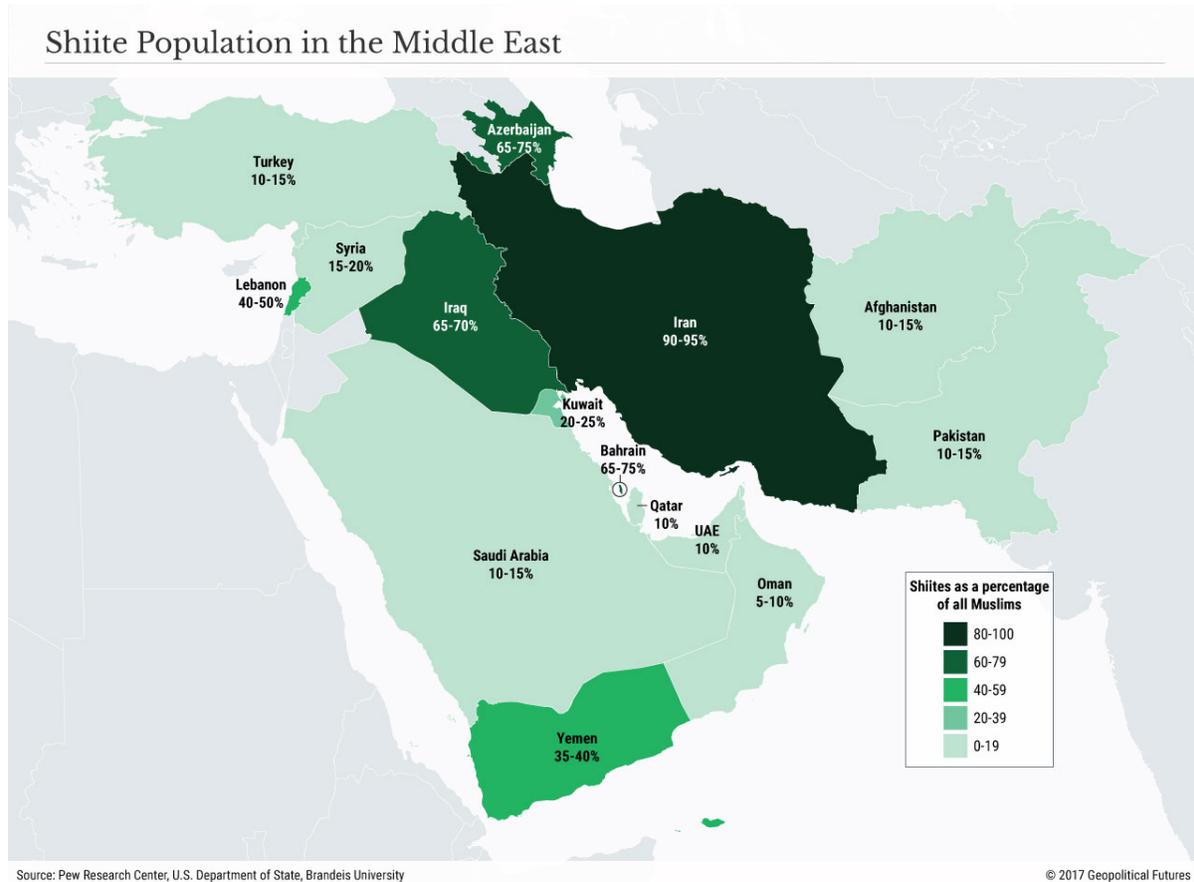
Riyadh’s reaction is in some ways understandable; there is domestic pressure on the kingdom to somehow end the war in Gaza, and the seven-year conflict it waged in Yemen – a disaster in its own right – has only solidified the position of the Houthis. Its decision to fight this war stemmed from the fact that the U.S., having seen its decades-long campaign in Iraq be followed by years of tumult after the Arab Spring, was no longer interested in embroiling itself in the Middle East beyond limited

interventions against transnational jihadists. Saudi Arabia and the Houthis halted hostilities in 2022, and Riyadh has been trying to reach an accommodation with the Iranians ever since – a process that led to the restoration of diplomatic relations last June.

The Saudi government believes these efforts enable it to manage regional security more effectively. It does not believe these efforts will compel Iran to abandon its goal to dominate the Middle East. This explains why the kingdom was feverishly working to normalize relations with Israel – a goal that was torpedoed by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack. Riyadh's strategy to halt Iran consists of a combination of U.S. oversight, restoring ties with Tehran and forging diplomatic relations with Israel.

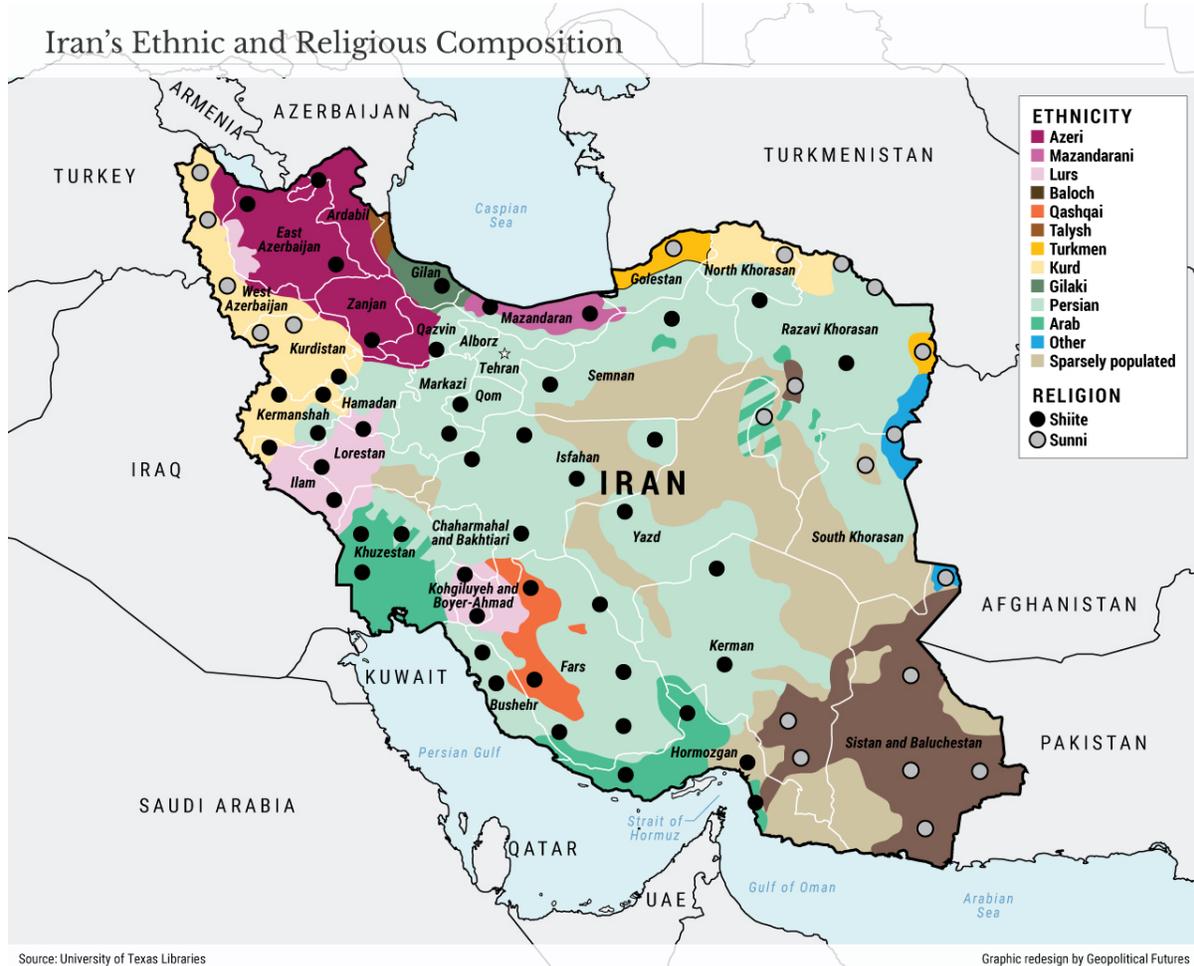
Saudi Arabia's ultimate problem is that, whereas the Iran-led Shiite camp is largely cohesive, the Sunni camp is deeply fragmented. Turkey, for example, could make for a strong counterweight against Iran, but Arab states do not want to defeat Iran only to end up being dominated by Turks. For now, it's a moot point anyway; not only is Ankara hemmed in by Iran through both Iraq and Syria, but it is also undergoing a financial crisis that requires Arab investment to resolve.

Though there are no regional states capable of decisively confronting the Islamic Republic, there are other factors endemic to Iran that will prevent it from dominating the region. For one thing, it is an ethnically Persian country that would struggle to wield control in Arab countries. It has been able to circumvent this obstacle by supporting Shiite groups from its borders to the Eastern Mediterranean. And as is evident with Iran's relationship with Hamas, Tehran has been able to bridge the geosectarian divide by developing some Sunni proxies. Here, it leverages a shared Islamist ideology with the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot. Far more significantly though, Iran has positioned itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause at a time when Arab states are seen as sympathetic to Israel. Indeed, Turkey and Qatar also support Hamas, but their behavior is reactive, often coming in response to Iranian actions.



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

But however successful Iran’s strategy has been in supporting groups from the Arabian Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean, it has extended its arc of influence about as far as it can go. Demographic factors such as the fact that non-Persians constitute more than half of Iran’s population, as well as the relative stability of Arab monarchies and strength of Israel, make it very difficult for Iran to penetrate further into the region. The massive sanctions regime is another key obstacle to any further external advances.



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Add to this the pending transition to a new supreme leader at a time when the ruling elite are bitterly divided, and Iran is left at a pivotal moment – not just in how it evolves as a country but also in how it maintains its geopolitical holdings in the region.

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